

# Gagging Row Rattles CSIRO Executives

CSIRO Chief Executive Geoff Garrett generated some torrid weeks in the news for CSIRO in his first 5 years, but the start of his second term as Chief Executive has been his worst as several chickens came home to roost.

It began with the publication of heavy international criticism in *Nature* (22 December 2005) of CSIRO's hyperbolic claims that the high-protein "CSIRO diet" had been "scientifically proven" (*AS*, March 2006, pp.1, 21–22).

CSIRO scientists also published a bold critique through its Staff Association President, Dr Michael Borgas, of management's "ineffective... communication" (*AS*, Jan/Feb 2006, p.13). Borgas wrote that members are "angered" by "the link to a former tobacco lobbyist" and "high salaries for non-science executives".

*The Canberra Times* picked this up on 4 January, where Borgas called for Donna Staunton's resignation as Director of Communications, and by *The Australian Financial Review* (*AFR*) on 7 January. Fleeting, Staunton came out of her shell and penned the first item in the media over her name or voice and CSIRO position (*AFR*, 18 January). Until then she had refused interviews throughout her 2 years in office.

Staunton spun the false line that CSIRO had not blackballed *Australasian Science* in mid-2004, but in letters to the *AFR* Borgas (20 January) and former CSIRO Chief of Entomology, Dr Max Whitten (23 January), challenged her claims and huge salary (\$300,000+). She returned to her bunker.

The wide relevance of these exchanges became apparent when *The Canberra Times* revealed CSIRO's boost to fossil fuel research while cutting renewable energy (4 February), and ABC's *Four Corners* (13 February) exposed the gagging of CSIRO scientists on environmental issues, especially climate change. Three former senior scientists spilled the beans on how

CSIRO managers restricted them from engaging with the media – Dr Graeme Pearman (*AS*, April 2005, p.43), Dr Barrie Pittcock and Barney Foran. CSIRO Executive Dr Steve Morton tied himself in knots while Dr Kevin Hennessy, CSIRO's Climate Impact Group Coordinator, answered simple factual questions five times with "I can't comment".



## Dark cloud for scientists



## CSIRO criticism unjustified

Science writer Peter Pockley has not been blackballed by CSIRO, although he has been "blacklisted" by CSIRO's public face, January 7th. Pockley has not been asked to give him but we always endeavour to cover them, sometimes within very short time frames.

Michael Borgas from the CSIRO Staff Association, who was also quoted, had a very cordial meeting with me just before Christmas. He did not raise that the CSIRO was propaganda driven – it was that I disagree with strongly.

CSIRO spends a lot of time and effort promoting the science that it does via, through the media, peer-reviewed articles, magazines and its website. Our website has good content, with, I think, some good discussions about the science. I think they would be pretty interested to hear they "oppose with billed complicity" to such. Like any large organisation we have governance standards, but this is not a black controlling scientific output. It's about ensuring we are not surprised by the scientific output.

The arrangement stated above my salary has already been corrected in the public domain.

Donna Staunton, Executive Director, CSIRO Communications, Canberra, ACT.

### Staunton's letter in the *AFR* on 18/2.

Two days later, Labor Senator Penny Wong grilled Garrett and Morton in Senate Estimates. Morton admitted that former Science Minister Peter McGauran had heaved him to clamp on CSIRO scientists' involvement with the Wentworth Group of conservation scientists, but McGauran later "denied" it.

The media went wild with major CSIRO stories in *The Age*, *Canberra*

*Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and ABC. Other CSIRO scientists who had been restricted or made redundant, like Dr Fred Prata and Dr Mike Young, joined in. Thereby, another CSIRO scandal went international through a prominent report in *Nature* alongside a report on parallel political restrictions on NASA climate scientists in the USA (23 February).

In *The Canberra Times* (3 March) Prof John Warhust, a political scientist at the Australian National University (ANU), recalled CSIRO's earlier glory days of open public involvement, and argued compellingly against restrictions that lead to "self-censorship". He unravelled Garrett & Co's spiel about a clear dividing line between "informing policy" and "writing or commenting on policy".

ANU geophysicist Dr Geoff Davies has continued this theme, writing that censorship of scientists "needs to be seen as part of the larger corruption of our political process by big money" (see *conSCIENCE*, p.42).

Characteristically, Garrett reacted with defensive "management-speak". Guided by Staunton's experience in defending tobacco, his claims like "CSIRO scientists are not gagged" (15 February) proved unpersuasive.

Within 5 days Garrett issued a memo to staff outlining the establishment of an eight-member panel that would conduct "focus group discussions in the domain of policy development to which we in CSIRO wish to see our science contribute".

Notably absent from the panel was Staunton, who wrote CSIRO's disciplinary "Policy on Public Comment" and controls staff appearances in the media. The panel includes Dr Jim Peacock, who has since been appointed Australia's Chief Scientist (see pp.36–37) but is still working half-time in CSIRO, much of this directly with Garrett.

The panel has been attacked for its lack of independent, external representatives.

Peter Pockley